

Bank of Chester County (National Bank
of Chester County, Southeast National Bank)
17 North High Street
West Chester Borough
Chester County
Pennsylvania

HABS No. PA-1126

HABS,
PA,
15-WCHES,
13-

PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20243

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HABS No. PA-1126

BANK OF CHESTER COUNTY

(National Bank of Chester County, Southeast National Bank)

Location: 17 North High Street, West Chester, Chester County, Pennsylvania.

Present Owner: National Bank of Chester County and Trust Company, 17 North High Street, West Chester, Pennsylvania.

Present Occupant: Present Owner.

Present Use: Bank building.

Statement of Significance: This fine Greek Revival bank was designed by a famous architect, Thomas U. Walter, and has an outstanding portico.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Original and subsequent owners:
Called Bank of Chester County 1814-1864;
Called National Bank of Chester County 1864-1930;
Called National Bank of Chester County and Trust Company 1930-present.
2. Date of erection: 1836 at cost of almost \$33,000.00.
3. Architect, builder, suppliers etc.:
Architect: Thomas U. Walter (for a fee of \$1,000.00)
Marble work: Tennant and Highlands
Stone work: Chalkley Jefferis
Master carpenter: James Powell
Plasterer: Yearsley Miles
The stone came from the Jacobs and Cornog marble quarry, West Whiteland township, Chester County, Pennsylvania. The details in full of the materials and their cost are given in Account Book of the Committee for Erecting a New Building House, 1835-1837, the original manuscript of which is in the Chester County Historical Society, West Chester, Pa.
4. Original plans, construction etc.: Original floor plan by the architect is in the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pa. An original water color dated 1836 is in possession of the bank. Fine portico based on Stuart and Revett's Antiquities of Athens, London 1762, Vol. 1, Chapter 1, plate IV. Four marble columns, Doric order, support the portico.

5. Alterations and additions: Bank has been lengthened and a wing to the south added when major changes were made in 1874, 1905 and 1928. In the last year the changes included the only one ever made to the west front of the building - lowering the floor of the bank and of the central part of the portico, making those levels only three steps from the sidewalk rather than eight.

6. Important old views and references:

a. Views:

Water color perspective of the building by the architect, dated 1836 in possession of the National Bank of Chester County and Trust Company, West Chester, Pa.

Water color by J. B. Taylor dated 1840 in possession of the Chester County Historical Society, West Chester, Pa.

Cut on the Map of East and West Goshen Townships and the Borough of Westchester published by Smith and Wistar, Philadelphia, Pa., 1849.

Cut on the Map of Chester County Pennsylvania by T. J. Kennedy. Published by R. L. Barnes, Philadelphia, 1856.

b. References: Sources of information, all to be found in the Chester County Historical Society, West Chester, Pa., unless otherwise noted:

Minutes of the Board of Directors of the Bank of Chester County, 1826-1839. Longhand.

Account Book of the Committee for Erecting a New Banking House, 1835-1837. Longhand.

Burnham, Smith. First Hundred Years of the National Bank of Chester County West Chester, Pennsylvania. Philadelphia: Innes & Sons, 1814.

Lindsay, G. Carroll. Athens on High Street, The Architectural Works of Thomas U. Walter in West Chester, Pennsylvania. Typed thesis in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, University of Delaware, 1955.

Copy in the Library, University of Delaware, Newark, Delaware.

Floor plan of the Bank of Chester County, drawn by
Thomas U. Walter, 1835. Original in the Historical
Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pa.

B. Historical Events Connected with the Structure:

The Bank of Chester County was chartered in 1814, the first in the county. Its first place of business was in the Record Office (which was a separate building from the Court House) at the southwest corner of High and Gay streets. A view of the original Court House and of the Record Office is in Sherman Day, Historical Collections of the State of Pennsylvania (Philadelphia, George W. Gorton, 1843), p. 219. In 1818 the Bank of Chester County purchased a lot and the building on the opposite side of High street (present day 13 High Street) which had been built by 1792, with an extension to the south c. 1795. Further additions and changes were made to fit the building for banking purposes and as a home for the bank cashier. It remained there until the Thomas U. Walter building was built and occupied May 30, 1837, it being the next property north of 13 North High street. The older building is still owned by the bank, and until the mid-1880's was used as a residence for its cashiers and since then it has been rented out to lawyers and businessmen as offices. Dr. William Darlington, president 1830-1863, David Townsend, cashier 1817-1849, and William W. Jefferis, cashier 1857-1883, were among the long-time bank officers who reflected the great interest of the town and county in natural history. Dr. Darlington wrote extensively on botany and all three were avid collectors. The mineral collection of Mr. Jefferis is now in the Carnegie Museum in Pittsburgh. All three corresponded widely with the leading scientists in Europe and America. Attached is a newspaper account of 1854 on the interior decoration of the bank which showed the taste for the natural sciences. At the time the present building was erected, the Bank of Chester County was exceeded in size only by banks in Harrisburg and Pittsburgh and some of the Philadelphia banks. It has weathered all panics and depressions and always has been active in public duties.

C. Supplemental Material:

1.

West Chester, Pa. April 18, 1836

To the Directors of the Chester County Bank,
Gentlemen,

"I have the pleasure of presenting to you the accompanying sketch of your Banking house.

"This drawing exhibits the appearance the building would

present, if the brick houses on the north were removed.

"I have selected this position for the purpose of enabling me to give you an idea of the architectural effect of the whole structure. This could not have been effected without omitting some of the adjoining houses; as in reality, very little more than the front of the Bank will be seen.

"Your wisdom in originating, and your liberality in executing, so laudable a work of art, as that in which we are now engaged, has emboldered me to lay before you this humble effort of my pencil; the acceptance of which, will be considered as an honour conferred on

Your Ob. serv
Tho. U. Walter"

/Letter dated April 18, 1836 from Thomas U. Walter to the Directors of the Chester County Bank - original in possession of National Bank of Chester County and Trust Company, 17 North High Street, West Chester, Pennsylvania./

2. "DECORATIVE OIL PAINTING. - Many of the business men of this community have already had the opportunity of admiring the beautiful manner in which the Banking room of the Bank of Chester County has been painted, by a family of Swedes who landed in this country in September last. The two principal artists, father and son, are nephew and grand nephew to our venerable townsman, Olof Stromberg, who left Sweden about the year 1800 and has been a resident of this town for more than half a century. His grand-nephew, Nils Stromberg, a lad of some 20 years of age, came to this country more than a year since, and shortly after presented himself before his uncle as one of his relatives from Sweden, from whom the old gentleman had not heard for many years. His uncle gave him a warm and hearty welcome, and after several months residence in the United States, the son concluded to urge his father to come over and bring with him his mother, brothers, and sisters. As before stated, his father landed in September last, bringing a wife, five children and a young lad an apprentice to his art, who was willing also to risk his fortunes in the new country with his employer. The father Carl Stromberg has been engaged all his life, and he is a man of more than fifty years of age, in the art of decorative painting in oil, and he certainly must have occupied a high position at home as an artist if we are to judge by his first work in this country.

"Very soon after arriving here the officers of the Bank desiring to re-paint the walls and ceiling of their Banking Room, engaged their services, and after eight weeks of constant labor they have produced a work that is highly

creditable to their skill, and which must at once secure to them permanent and profitable employment. In some of our larger cities this mode of painting has been in use for a few years, but for the most part the art is new to us, our people generally covering the walls of their houses with ornamented paper.

"The ceiling of the room is painted in two shades of delicate blue, and the side walls with a subdued tint of rose color. On these two ground colors, are series of beautiful designs representing for the most part combinations of leaves, fruit, and flowers. The stucco centre piece on the ceiling is gilt, and so also a carved wreath surrounding the clock. Around an indented square panel occupying the greater part of the ceiling of the Banking Room, is a continuous vine representing grape leaves and rich clusters of grapes, with a design springing from each corner of the panel towards the centre of the ceiling. The gilt centre piece is also surrounded by a wreath of leaves and graceful figures, all of these designs being painted in colors to produce the effect of, and represent plaster or stucco work. Just under the heavy cornice, at the angle formed by the ceiling and the side walls, there extends around the entire room, a highly ornamented arabesque border about eighteen inches or two feet wide.

"The side walls are then laid off in panels with decorated corners, and in the centre of the largest of them is an elaborate wreath of leaves forming a kind of medallion frame work, for a very beautiful landscape, each panel illustrating a different scene or subject.

"It so happens, and the co-incidence is a rare one, that the President of the Bank, Dr. William Darlington, and the ex-Cashier, David Townsend, Esq., are both very distinguished Botanists, - thorough and enthusiastic followers and admirers of the science of the great Linnaeus. These two gentlemen are so widely known amongst scientific Botanists, particularly Dr. Darlington, that they have each had plants named after them, and some one with very good taste suggested the idea that these plants should be represented by the artists in a panel over the door of the rooms of the President and Cashier, and the idea has been as handsomely carried out, as the compliment to those gentlemen is delicate and well deserved. Accordingly we have in the panel over the door of the President's room, the "Darlingtonia Californica," and in that over the door of the Cashier's room, the "Townsendia Sericea."

"Our description of the work performed by these artists is

necessarily meagre and imperfect, but we are anxious to draw particular attention to their first effort, so that people may make a visit to the Bank, to see how really beautiful this style of decorative painting is. When they look at the fine effect, and learn that it is not so expensive as to be beyond the means of some of our wealthy citizens, we think these worthy people from Northern Europe will find that their skill and taste will meet with constant and liberal employment."

/American Republican, West Chester, Pennsylvania, December 19, 1854./

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: This building, designed by Thomas Ustick Walter, is an excellent Greek Revival structure.
2. Condition of fabric: The building is in excellent condition and is well maintained.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: Forty-five feet (45') by ninety feet (90').
2. Foundations: Building Committee Minutes, May 13, 1835: "Resolved, that the Basement be faced with good rubble Stone pointed, and that the water table be composed of Marble of an inferior quality."
3. Wall construction: Building Committee Minutes, May 13, 1835: "Resolved that all the Marble in the Building be backed with Bricks."
4. Porches, stoops: A portico extends on the front west side with four Doric columns.
5. Chimneys: No original ones remain. See section of this report dealing with "Heating" for what flues there were at first.
6. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: West front had one door. In 1928 the floor of the bank and the central part of the portico were lowered.

- b. Windows and shutters: Original building has two windows on both the north and south sides. These walls were completely rebuilt in 1928. The original windows were placed in slightly recessed and arched niches.

6. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: Gable roof. Building Committee Minutes, May 13, 1835: "Resolved, that the roof be covered with Copper."
- b. Cornice, eaves: The cornice on the front portico exists with the original Doric metope and triglyph frieze. The side cornices were removed in 1928 and have been reproduced.

C. Description of Interior:

- 1. Floor plans: Original floor plan showed the large banking room as it is now, only smaller. The two vaults originally to the right and left of the entrance vestibule have been changed into offices, and the two rear rooms and the rooms over them (east end of old building) have completely been done away with. The building has two stories.
- 2. Stairways: Nothing remains of the original stairway to the room or rooms over the two rear offices at the east end of the original banking room.
- 3. Flooring: Nothing remains of the original.
- 4. Wall and ceiling finish, and trim: The Bank's interior originally was in a classic Greek tradition. Marble walls were present with a frieze of conventionalized floral form around the top. The plaster ceiling was accentuated by a border derived from Greek Ornamentation.

1854 - Carl Stromberg redecorated the interior. The ceiling was painted two shades of blue, the walls a rose with a border of "leaves, fruit and flowers." The side walls had panels displaying murals of "different landscapes and scenes."

1928 - The interior in keeping with the classic facade was redecorated in the Greek influence and design. (For a further account refer to Part I, C Supplemental Material.)

- 5. Doorways and doors: No original ones remain in the interior.

6. Hardware: Nothing remains of the original. Hardware dates back to 1928 redecoration.
7. Lighting: Modern electricity.
8. Heating: Building Committee Minutes, September 23, 1836: Resolved "That N. H. Sharples be authorized and requested to procure a furnace of Suitable description for the Same - And that William Williamson be authorized and requested to procure Six Marble Mantels, and Six Coal grates of Suitable Size and description for the Said Banking House." The original fireplaces were six in number, one on both the north and south sides of the main banking room, one in the president's office and one in the cashier's office. The other two were apparently over the last two offices. The director's room or rooms were on this upper level at the east end of the original building.

D. Site:

General setting and orientation: The bank building is north of its older home, oldest part 1792, and south of a commercial building c. 1840-1850. On west side of the street is the Court House and Court House Annex. The front of the building faces west on High Street, flush at public pavement.

Prepared by Bart Anderson
Curator, Chester County
Historical Society
National Park Service
July 1958